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Religion and Marginality: A Critique of Dalit Life writings

Abstract: The life writings of the Dalit writers depict a comprehensive picture of the daily lives of the Dalit community, their ethos, ordeal due to oppressive caste, poverty, their stoic endurance and unflinching optimism for a bright future. Most of the life writings unravel the religious faith of the people despite their marginalization and the attitude of the ignorant and the educated Dalits towards their religion, Hinduism or Christianity or Buddhism. This paper attempts to explore the role of religion in the marginalisation of the Dalits of India and critically analyse the perspectives of the marginalized, their heterogeneous approach and the influence of Ambedkar's thoughts as far as their religion is concerned through the life writings of selected Dalit writers.

Introduction

“The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu.

The Hindus wanted an Epic and they for Valmiki who was an Untouchable.

The Hindus wanted a constitution and they sent for me.” - Ambedkar

(qtd.Ganguly 140)

The life writings of the Dalit writers can very well be called socio-biographies of their community as they talk more about their community rather than their individual personal life.

These life writings elaborate on the entire community's ethos, their trials and tribulations due to their marginalized predicament, and their endurance and resilience. The chief objective of this paper is to critically analyse the perspectives of the Dalit community on religion and their attitude towards religion and religious conversion as revealed through selected Dalit life writings such as Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), translated from Marathi *Jina Amucha* by Maya Pandit, Bama's *Sangati: Events* (2005), translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmström, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003), translated from Hindi by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003) and Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* (2005) translated from Kannada by Dharani Devi Malagatti, Janet Vucinich and N.Subramanya. In the course of this analysis, this paper also endeavours to explore the influence of Ambedkar's thoughts and ideology and their heterogeneous approach towards religion.

Religious Faith &Exploitation

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* explicates the life of Mahars in the Maharwada of Veergaon in Maharashtra. She reveals that in spite of their menial life deprived of all kinds of human privileges, the Mahars devotedly follow the rituals and give their heart and soul to perform their religious duties with utmost dedication. Their tradition of giving away the eldest son to the service of God, the excitement and disorder due to the 'screaming epidemic' (22) of possessed women, their frenzied dance, their prediction of good and bad omens in their possessed state and the sincere attempts of the village elders and men to pacify them, sharing of the offerings among the entire Mahar community in "keeping with their status and honour" (29), the buffalo fair with its frightening impact on the people, their offerings to the deity, and so on, are scrupulously presented. Kamble highlights the fact that their otherwise uninteresting and monotonous life gains some colour through these rituals. She says:

“Memories of the buffalo fair would help them survive their miserable and wretched lives. They would live in their dirt pits on the periphery of the village, like discarded rags, ignored by society, and wait for the buffalo fair to come again the following year” (35). She also gives a detailed description of the way the Dalit women observe the ritual baths in the month of Ashadh, their inquisitiveness in their neighbour’s affairs, their interesting exchange of their everyday chores and she says: “The village would reverberate with such conversations” (18). Kamble observes that these “rituals were, in a sense, an outlet for their oppressed souls. This was how they tried to find some solace in their terrible lives” (18). According to kamble, it is their longing for a respectable life makes them follow the Hindu rituals devotedly. Kamble gives vent to their agony:

Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts.... Our minds somehow kept on hoping against hope – that we too would be able to live like the upper castes...” (18).

About the women being possessed by various deities, Kamble comments:

The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life.

Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully (37).

Baby Kamble asserts that the Mahars are kept in ignorance in the name of religion and the upper caste people exploit their ignorance to keep them under control. They insist that it is the responsibility of the Mahars to behave properly with utmost care so that they cause no pollution by means of their touch. Otherwise, the upper caste women will shout, “Our house will get polluted. Then we will have to polish the floor with cow dung and wash all our clothes, even the rags in the house! Such trouble we’ll have to undergo for your foolishness! And how will

the gods tolerate this, tell me? They too will be polluted, won't they?" (55). As rightly observed by Maya Pandit in her Introduction:

The customs, rituals, rites, festivals and the jatras she describes are indeed a source of unexplored treasure for a sociologist, ... But more than that they represent the composite apparatus of Brahminical dominance perpetrated through superstitions, illiteracy, ignorance and oppressive practices." (Pandit x)

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (2003) also unravels the world of ignorance in which the marginalized people live, obsessed with their superstitious beliefs in ghosts and spirits, besides the exploitation of the upper caste men. They usually try to get relief from their ordeals through remedial pujas to their deities. If one falls sick, they would call a 'bhagat' or a sorcerer, instead of going to a doctor. He would remove the evil spell by offering pigs and roosters to deities. The deities they worship are different from the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Valmiki attests that, "Not only in our basti, but in the entire Valmiki community, people do not worship Hindu gods and goddesses. It is another matter for the educated among us who begin to worship them in order to assimilate. The Valmiki community worships its own gods and goddesses whose names are not to be found either in the Vedas or in the Puranas. The rituals and methods of worship are also different." (62) Valmiki also talks about the goddess Mata temple and the special "puja" done in the month of Asharh, during which the "basti people united avidly for this annual puja." (44). They firmly believe that, it is essential to worship the gods whenever there is an important event in their life such as a wedding or birth or death. They ascribe their sufferings to their own failure to do the needful to the gods and goddesses. So they will try their best to fulfill their vows to gods despite their impoverished conditions. Their ignorance and superstition, chiefly due to their menial subsistence, bogged them down and perpetuated their miserable plight.

In *Sangati: Events* (2005), Bama also talks about their superstitious beliefs and belief in ghosts and spirits. It is to be noted that only the women are often possessed by 'peys' (spirits).

The narrator wonders,

... how a man could even strike at a "pey" bravely, while a woman is easily caught and becomes its prey. And even among women, I never heard of upper-caste women becoming possessed or dancing in frenzy. The peys always seem to set on women from the pallar, paraiyar, chakkilyar, and koravar communities" (57-58).

The narrator tries to find out the reason for the same. She affirms:

Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their own disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The stronger ones somehow manage to survive all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are totally oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys" (59).

In Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003), Damu and Sonu portray their rituals like jatra (village fair) which are carried out with great enthusiasm. These ceremonies will make the Dalits happy as "someone would offer a sacrificial animal and the main attraction would be the meat curry" (58). The Gods they worship like Mariaai, are different from those of the upper castes. Sonu says: "Actually, we untouchables were not allowed to worship Ganapati, the God of the upper castes" (118). The untouchables are not allowed entry inside the temple. Chhotu says: "Even the shadow of an untouchable was not supposed to fall on the temple" (211). They are made to worship a boulder which "was the boundary beyond which the untouchables were not allowed to step" (213). Chhotu remarks in a bitter tone:

The touchables could enter the temple. The untouchables only had the boulder.... The boulder became their makeshift Vithoba – Crude, buffeted by the elements, like they were

quite unlikely the richly clad, bejewelled idol of the touchable God within. (213)

Arvind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* (2005) too exposes the exploitation of the untouchables in the name of religion and tradition. He observes:

There are interesting equations between the traditions of the village and the traditions of the untouchables' colony. These equations work to the detriment of Dalits and to the advantage of others. In the guise of having given a role to the Dalits in the affairs of the village, they put their lives in a fix – like areca nuts placed between the twin blades of a cutter - and slice them up. Just as they are recruited in the present democratic set up for the lowliest jobs, earlier they were recruited for traditional menial jobs. (42)

He cites a number of traditional festivals and rituals like “Okuli festival” (festival celebrated by splashing coloured water on people), “bevina uduge” (worshipping God, wearing only neem leaves around their waist), “gandhade uduge”(worshipping God wearing only neem sticks), “betalle seve” (celebrations in the nude) and “mala prashana” (feeding shit to the Dalits) which stand as evidences for the height of human cruelty and vulgarity.

Ambedkar's Influence & Radical thinking

The Dalit writers demonstrate their enlightened self effectuated through the influential ideology of Ambedkar. They become empowered to question the religious conventions and norms when they are oppressed beyond their tolerance. Gail Omvedt in her '*Dalit Visions*' observes that, “For Ambedkar, and for the militant dalits who followed him, Hinduism remained in the final analysis a religion of caste that had to be renounced and destroyed if the masses of India were to win liberation.” (51)

Kamble proves herself to be the staunch follower and advocate of Ambedkar in her life writing. “I am a product of the Ambedkar movement. I came in contact with the movement

when I was a child of hardly seven or eight years of age.” (125). She considers Ambedkar as the savior and deifies thus: “... Baba has been enshrined in our hearts” (129). Kamble questions the upper caste Hindus directly and demands justice:

We never rebelled against you, did we?... We obeyed every diktat of your Hindu religion,

we followed all your traditions – why did you single us out for your contempt?... Why, we would even spread out hands like spittoons for you if you wanted to spit! Then why did you treat us with so much contempt? Coarse we may have been, but we always remained so loyal to you. (38)

She becomes indignant when she thinks of this discrimination in the name of religion; her rightful anger blasts out:

What a beastly thing this Hindu religion is! Let me tell you, it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy – it is the very lifeblood of the Mahars! ...“Doesn't it pollute you then? Just as the farmer pierces his bullock's nose and inserts a string through the nostrils to control it, you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. (56)

She gains confidence even to doubt the justice of Gods Barama and Satwai (Brahma and Saraswathi, Hindu Gods), who are believed to write the fate of every individual when he/she is born. She asks: “But didn't all the babies in the Mahar community share the same fate? So what was there to write on the forehead of each baby? Actually, both Barama and Satwai probably give the Mahar household a miss. Or they must have made one common stamp for all the Mahar children!” (62).

Valmiki's education and his reading of Ambedkar's thoughts make him understand the plight of the ignorant Dalits. He confesses: “Even though I grew up in this atmosphere, after reaching

the age of discernment, I never had any faith in these gods and goddesses. The 'bhagat' seemed a pretender to me." (41) When he started behaving indifferently to these rituals his father was apprehensive and asked several times, "'Munshiji ... I hope you haven't become a Christian.'" Though Valmiki used to reassure him that he had not become a Christian, many times he wants to declare, "'Neither am I a Hindu.' If I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill me up with caste inferiority over the smallest things?" (41) He further reflects: "I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits? (41) Though his sixth sense prevented him from believing in these ghosts and spirits, he frankly reveals that he was "culturally conditioned" (42) to fear them. It took many years for him to get rid of these fears. He exposes his faith in Buddhist principle:

"Buddha's philosophy on human freedom had attracted me. He says that there is no such thing as the unchangeable in a constantly changing universe. The human being alone matters. It is *karuna* and wisdom that takes a person towards transcendence." (100)

Scholarly treatments of Ambedkar and his movement uniformly assert that Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion was an attempt to strengthen the Mahar community against the dominant Hindu social and political hierarchy by providing his followers with an alternative, and egalitarian, identity. (Blackburn 1)

Damu stands as a testimony for this in *Outcaste: A Memoir*. About gaining entry into the Kala Ram temple, Damu reflects the morale of the devout followers of Ambedkar in his words: We will participate in this movement. Why should Mahars be prevented from entering the temple? ... Not that I believe in idol worship, or in God for that matter. However, we are no

less human, and no one can prevent us from going where others are allowed. It is a question of our rights as human beings and we are going to fight for it. (123)

Thus the discernible influence of Ambedkar could be seen in the awakening of the Dalit writers.

Heterogeneous approach to religion

The Dalits who have been deprived of basic human rights and privileges in the name of caste and religion, do have a natural craving for equal rights like other human beings. This desire for enjoying their due rights make them tackle the issue in different manners. The life writings of the Dalit writers give evidence for these heterogeneous manifestations of the human psyche.

Baby Kamble reflects the psyche of the human beings when they are unduly denied the rights of something they deserve. When the Dalits are denied entry to the temples as per the religious code, they have the tendency to violate the norms as a mark of anger or revenge. At the same time they are also bogged down by the centuries- long slavery inherent in them. She narrates one of her experiences in visiting the Ram temple during her school days. Driven by childish curiosity and inquisitiveness, a group of Mahar girls dared to visit the temple after two years of planning: "Our minds were thrilled that finally we were going to see Ram, but at the same time, we were also scared that the god would punish us for transgression." (130) She could recapture the fear, panic and the guilt when they entered the temple: "Our eyes constantly flitting back and forth, our hearts beating against our ribs, hands tightly held together, we crossed the first hall. ... Our hearts thundering and mouths dry, we forgot even to breathe." (131) When they were caught by the upper caste priest, they confessed to him: "We are Mahar girls and the god has sent demons after us because we have polluted him." (131) After this terrifying experience, Baby Kamble resolves: "...I will never ever think of that god again in my life. Nor will I ever climb the steps of a temple again." (132)

Malagatti also shares a similar experience of him visiting Raghavendra temple in Mantralaya. He says: “It was a unique experience. Not that I haven’t been to Mantralaya after this incident, but I have returned without even entering the temple!” (64) After reaching the place, he says: “All the dreams about Mantralaya which I had nurtured in my mind were rudely shattered on reaching the place. I wished I had never visited the place.” (64) He feels that he is totally strange to that place and the rituals. So he becomes very nervous: “My heart started beating fast even before entering the premises of Mantralaya. ... The first reason was we were low caste people; the second was they could identify us easily because we were not wearing the sacred thread; and the third was we did not even have white clothes to wear.” (65) Malagatti and his friends are wearing the sacred thread and with the help of some of his Brahmin friends they enter the temple and worship the deity closely following their friends. While waiting for the food given in the temple, Malagatti becomes afraid of getting identified by others. “Despite wiping myself frequently, I was sweating profusely. My mouth and throat had dried up.” (67) As anticipated, he is caught by the doorkeeper. Malagatti and his friends run away from that place. He reveals: “After absconding from there, ... we had no peace of mind. The fear of someone coming to catch us nagged us constantly. We heaved a sigh of relief only after the bus left the place.” (68)

Similar is the plight of Chhotu when he first visits the shrine of Vithoba. He verbalizes his emotional turmoil:

Realisation that I did not belong there flooded my mind ... I was the unwanted, unworthy untouchable. I was transported to another era. Fear gripped me...I could be thrown out of the temple...whipped for violating time-honoured social customs. (212; ellipsis in orig.) He falls victim to the deep-rooted religious slavery within his inner self. He pours out, “I became a bundle of nerves, and my palms grew sticky with sweat” (211). When the chairman

of the trust and the head priest welcomed him, he was in a perplexed state of mind and says, “I was suddenly gripped by confusion and was in a daze. This could not be happening to me, could it? Was fate playing tricks? Was it being cruel and vindictive, or was it being acquiescent”? (211). He was in utter confusion and dilemma because of the faith entombed in his genes by the religious convention that,

the caste system was disposed by God and not by mortals. It has such a powerful sanction behind it that no laws, no reform movements, and no revolutions will ever change it completely. It is so deeply imbedded in our social conscience, so securely implanted, that even HE has no choice, no ability, and no power to mend it. (212)

His mind is caught between the joy of his new achievement - his “quantum leap from the lowest rung to the top” (213) by entering into the shrine of Vithoba, which has been denied for him so far, and the pain of inferiority complex. Though his mind hurtles forward with the impossible made possible, it is thwarted by the inalienable caste consciousness, which prevents him from accepting the changed reality.

Thus the all-pervasive influence of caste is so powerful that even the educated Dalits are helpless to deliver themselves from its grip, without any confusion. They are not able to rationalize that it is their fundamental right to enter into the temple and worship the Lord with equanimity, like any other human being. Such is the haunting power of religious slavery fossilized in them.

Conversion to other religion

The life writings of the Dalit writers reveal that caste proves to be a more powerful factor than religion. Malagatti feels that even changing one’s religion does not alter the life of the Dalits. The untouchable converts are not included in the religion but remain as a separate sect. Even during the twelfth century, when lower caste people got converted, they remained

as sub sects of particular castes. Similarly Dr.Ambedkar became a neo-Buddhist and not a Buddhist. He adds: “In the same period my ancestors were drawn into Veerashaivism and became Veerashaivas. But now we are Veerashaiva Harijans!” (46). So he affirms:

The bond of religion becomes suffocating when it turns into shackles. Besides indirectly it gives scope for another religion to grow. Thus with the fall or revision of one religion we find the growth of another. Within these icebergs called religions sprout a number of sects, like mushrooms, that end up competing with one another. Though both these kinds of conversions lead to new names, they have not been able to bring about a qualitative change in either the basic culture or flow of life.” (46)

Bama also reflects the same with regard to their conversion to Christianity, the religion which advocates liberal humanism. As rightly commented, “Dalit Literature subsumes the writings of all these sections including Muslims and Christians whose changed religious status has not insulated humiliation arising out of their earlier low – caste origin” (Punalekar 216). Among the Dalits, the paraiyas alone became Christians with the hope of getting freedom from discrimination. They are seen to regret about their decision to become Christians: “Why on earth paraiyas alone became Christians, I don’t know, but because they did so at that time, now it works out that they get no concessions from the government whatsoever” (*SE* 5). The ignorant people, the new Christian converts, as usual, will try to get the help of temple priests whenever somebody falls sick. At that time, the priest in the Church will threaten them by saying, “you will definitely go to hell forever” (14). These ignorant women who want to get solace in some way or other instantly comes out with solution: “...if you feel worried about it, you can always go to confession after you’ve been to the pujari, get a pardon and take communion” (14).

Their dream of getting relief from their marginalized predicament in the name of caste does not materialise, even after they become Christians. Even in the church, only the lower

caste women need to sweep and keep the church clean, so that the other castes “march in grandly and sit down before anyone else” (119). When these women go and complain to the nuns, they are told that they will gain merit by sweeping the church and God will bless them specially. But the village women could sense: “How they fool us in the name of God! Why don’t those people need God’s blessing too?” (119). Thus in her interview, Bama attests: “In reality, there is no difference between Hindus and Christians in the way they treat Dalits. The only difference between the two is that while Hinduism is basically hierarchical, Christianity claims to be caste-free, but in practice it preserves the caste hierarchy” (Azhagarasan 146).

Conclusion

The study of the life writings of the selected Dalit writers shows that the Dalits exhibit a staunch religious faith in their everyday life and they strive to get some relief from their menial conditions through these religious ceremonies and rituals. Though they are exploited in the name of religion, they hope against hope for a better life. Ambedkar’s ideals prove to be a powerful influence in the lives of the Dalit writers and they reveal their awakened self and radical thinking through their writings. Despite their confidence gained through their education, they still find it difficult to detonate the shell of religious slavery ingrained in them for centuries. Also, these life writings establish beyond any doubt that even conversion to other religions does not ensure freedom from the clutches of their caste.

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